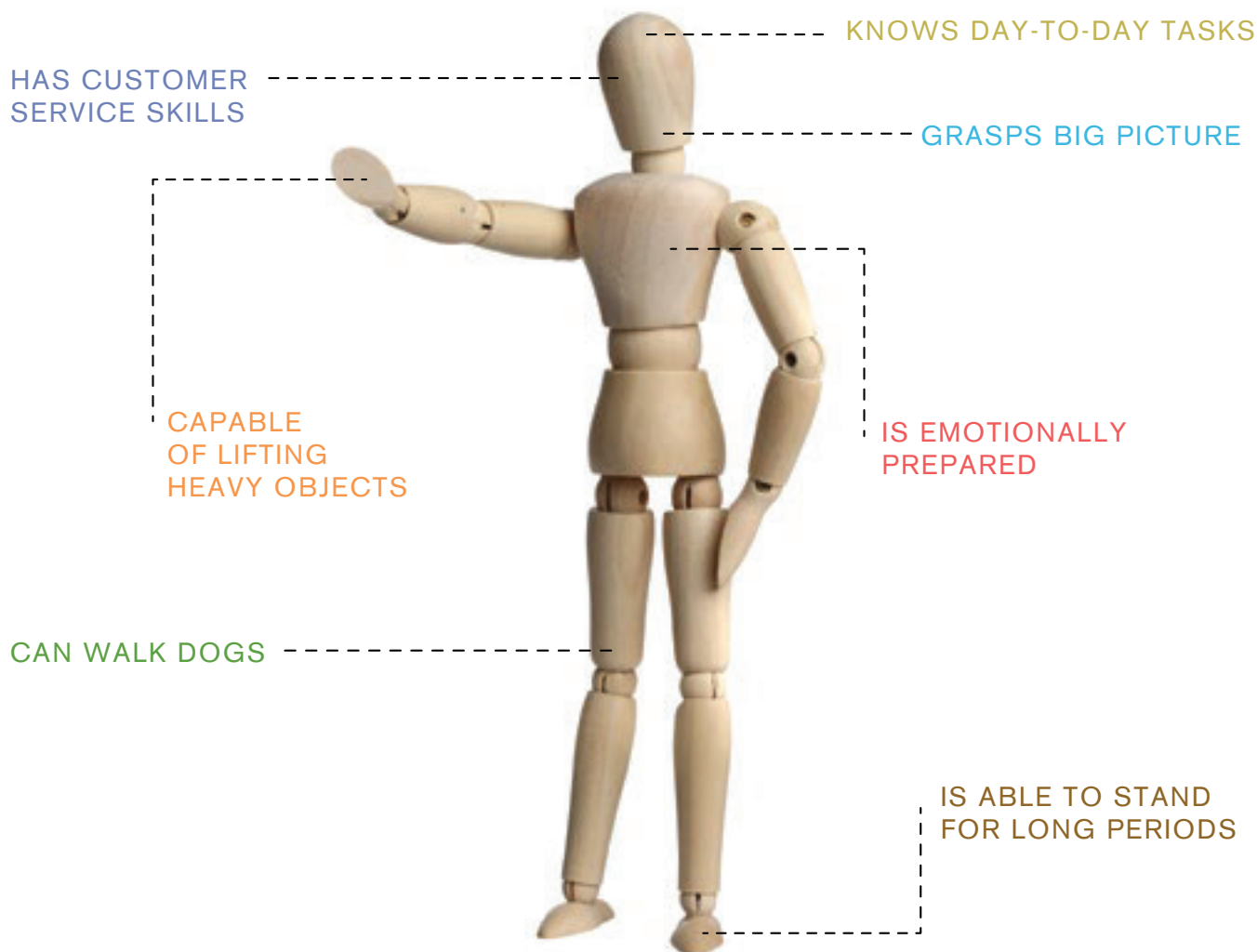


Take Time for Training

Successful volunteer programs rely on well-prepared people matched to the right roles

BY HILARY ANNE HAGER AND MEGAN WEBB



Over and over again, we see it: Animal welfare agencies caught in a catch-22. They know they need volunteers to help complete the tremendous amount of work that needs to be done, but they often feel they don't have time to train them. But failing to train volunteers always backfires and leads agencies to lose more time fixing the problems untrained volunteers can create.

Staff members often fear that volunteers will cause more trouble than they're worth,

be disruptive, make high-stakes mistakes, give out incorrect information, or somehow set up the animals for failure. Nearly all of these issues can be prevented with the right training for the right individuals in the right jobs.

It's critical to figure out what type of program you need and want to have. If you need people who are experts from the get-go, you can recruit only dog trainers and cat whisperers and cut down on your need to train on basic animal handling and training skills.

Keep in mind, though, that even if people are experts in a general sense, they will have little understanding of how their knowledge applies in your organization. They will still need orientation to the ground rules and lay of the land.

If the work requires little previous knowledge of animal welfare or animal care, it might not matter what type of volunteer you bring in, as long as you can provide the general framework for their tasks. These volun-

[volunteer management]

MANAGER SKILL:
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teers might help organize donated supplies, do yard work, or hand out informational fliers at events—all useful tasks, but ones that may not require experienced volunteers.

Both inexperienced and expert volunteers can be helpful, but you should never bring in inexperienced volunteers and assign them work that must be done in a particular way (with serious consequences if it is not), and then fail to provide the training they need to succeed. This happens all the time, in all kinds of shelters and rescue groups across the country. It's a setup for frustration and disappointment, and a surefire way to have things go badly for everyone.

To create a training program or revise an existing one, start by selecting one volunteer position in your agency, then break it down into its different elements. What specific things do the volunteers need to know how to do from the minute they arrive for their shift until the time they're ready to leave? Use the chart provided at animalsheltering.org/volunteer_skills to identify the knowledge and abilities needed for the position. How important are each of these to the position? Which ones must a volunteer have

when they start the position, and which ones can your organization instill through training or support?

For example, if you evaluate your dog volunteer position and realize you need your volunteers to provide education to the public, the ability to communicate will be a critical skill. Most agencies don't have the ability to teach new volunteers communication skills, so you'll probably have to screen volunteers beforehand.

Knowledge

Potential volunteers need to grasp the bigger picture of the organization (*Is it public or private? Does it provide sheltering or fostering? What programs and services does it offer?*) and the smaller picture, knowing how to complete specific day-to-day tasks. They need to know how to answer questions from the public, speaking about the organization and its functions with language that the organization provides—rather than making up their own answers based on possibly faulty information. Each organization will need to determine the best way to provide instruction in these areas.

Physical Skills

Each volunteer position has a different set of physical requirements. For example, walking dogs is likely to be more physically rigorous than assisting the public with the adoption process. Organizations should look at each task and identify the physical abilities the volunteers need to be safe, do the job effectively, and meet the organization's needs. It's useful to make potential volunteers aware of the requirements during their introduction to the organization and its volunteer opportunities, especially if the requirements for each position vary widely. Many people simply don't have any idea of what the organization's needs are, or what volunteering might involve. Sharing the physical needs with them early in the process will help them to self-identify where they might fit best. Physical skills (such as the ability to lift certain weights or stand for long periods) are things the volunteers must innately have; the organization is unlikely to be able to train volunteers in these areas.

Mental Skills

The mental skills required can range from being able to read, write, and communicate effectively to possessing excellent customer service and problem-solving abilities. Each volunteer task will have different requirements, and a thorough examination of what the organization needs to succeed will help determine which types of people will be best suited to each role.

Emotional Skills

Most agencies remember that they need to train their volunteers on the knowledge and physical needs of the position, but they forget the emotional aspects. We need to prepare volunteers to deal with the emotions they are going to face when working with homeless animals, upset citizens, and frustrated or even hostile staff. Volunteering with animals is not like volunteering at a Little League, child's school, or thrift store; it's a highly emotionally charged environment that requires people to be emotionally prepared to function well within it.

When you look at the list of possible skills we've provided, you may feel overwhelmed. However, your agency will benefit by realizing that if you truly don't have the resources

to do much training, then you need to focus on screening for volunteers who already have those skills or pare down the job description to require less. You don't want to put an untrained volunteer into a position that asks them to do things beyond their capacities. You must either provide training, require less from the volunteers, or screen for volunteers with existing skills.

The good news is that you don't have to conduct all the training yourself. You should take advantage of the expertise and experience of your staff and longtime volunteers by having them help. It will save you quite a bit of time, increase staff buy-in and support of the volunteer program, and build leadership and commitment among your core volunteers.

The most important elements of successful training are making sure you properly identify the information that needs to be shared, the right methods of sharing it, and the right people to deliver the material. We've heard that humans only retain 20 percent of what they hear. They retain 40 percent of what they hear and see, but retain 80 percent of what they hear, see, and do. Good trainings provide opportunities for people to actually practice (under supervision) the work they'll be doing in order to ensure it's being done correctly.

Who Does the Training?

One thing we hear a lot from animal organizations is that they don't have the staff to do the trainings. This should not be a barrier to putting together an excellent training program. We both utilize volunteer trainers in our programs to train our other volunteers.

With input from staff, volunteers, and the volunteer program manager, a curriculum can be developed that covers all of the items the group decides are critical, and volunteers can be trained to deliver the content in the most effective ways possible, freeing up staff to do their own work.

Regardless of who does the trainings, the material must be developed in such a way that it can be delivered consistently no matter who is leading the training. This means finding trainers who are good at training, who enjoy it, and who view it as a fun opportunity rather than a chore. It also means creating a script of some sort that everyone can follow, which eliminates the possibility that impor-

tant things are left out or that too much time will be spent on one thing over another.

Types of Training

People learn differently and have different preferences about how material is presented to them. Some people learn best when they hear things; others learn best when they read the material; and others learn best when they learn hands-on. The best approach to take is to develop a training plan that incorporates all of these elements so you can meet the needs of a wide range of learners.

Once the material is outlined, the next step is to focus on how best to deliver each piece of content. Some elements of the training are great to have in a written manual and touched upon briefly in a verbal presentation. Other things might need to be shown. For example, if you have volunteers who will be doing laundry or dishes, it's likely to be more effective to show someone how to set up the sink and operate the dishwasher than to explain it in a step-by-step instruction sheet.

The size of the program might also inform the training format. In a smaller program, it might be possible to do one-on-one trainings, or to put a small group of trainees with the trainer in a group setting. With larger programs, a classroom setting might be a more effective way to train bigger groups of people at the same time. While it can be more efficient to train in large groups, it's important to keep in mind that the content needs to be the guide: It's a challenge to show 20 people at once how to work the washing machine.

There are lots of ways trainings can work; there is no one right way to do it. Each organization needs to make a decision about what will best suit its own structure and the goals of the program. The critical part is that it gets done, and done well.

At Hilary's shelter, volunteers attend a general orientation, and then are assigned to trainings for the volunteer opportunity in which they plan to participate. Anyone who will ever handle a dog at the shelter must attend a class on safe dog handling; anyone who will ever touch a cat attends one on safe cat handling. The courses include an introduction to animal body language and behavior, how to read the animals' paperwork, how to handle the animals safely, how to get the animals in and out of their kennels or cages,

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and how to train and socialize the animals during their stay.

Following the safe-handling classes, volunteers attend the training relevant for their position; they either attend a feline or canine training class, and/or another one-on-one, on-the-job training session. These trainings cover how to sign in and out of the shelter, how to prepare for the shift, how to complete all the tasks on the shift, and how to answer all of the frequently asked questions they'll encounter. All volunteers must also complete a one-hour observation shift at the front counter so they'll know what a "day in the life" of staff can be like. At each stage of the training, the volunteer trainers can report back to Hilary if they feel the trainee is having difficulty learning the material or if they are behaving in a way that is a cause for concern.

Each of the trainings described have visual elements (handouts, demonstrations, PowerPoint presentations, or written documentation), and an oral presentation with plenty of opportunities to ask questions and quiz the trainees to assess their comprehension. The sessions also have hands-on elements where volunteers can practice getting a dog or cat out of the cage or kennel, or walking a dog with appropriate leash-handling techniques.

Some of the basic things volunteers need to know can be covered in a volunteer orientation or handbook, including volunteer policies and required commitment; organizational mission, vision, and values; and grievance procedures, termination policies, etc. Any informational handouts the organization uses to share information with the public should also be provided to volunteers to help them understand adoption policies, what the organization does, and anything else they're likely to be asked in their role.

Making it Stick

No matter what type of training program is implemented for the volunteers, it only works if they're actually learning. At every stage of the process, it's important to check with the trainees to make sure they understand what's being said. A great way to do that in a classroom setting is to take breaks from content delivery to ask questions of the class, or to ask students to demonstrate how to do a particular task. If trainees are working with men-

tors, it's important that the trainees not only observe the correct way to do it, but that they also do the task with the mentor watching and available to give feedback and answer questions. It might also be worth considering developing a quiz.

At Hilary's shelter, an assessment has been designed that has written, oral, and hands-on elements to gauge how prepared junior volunteers are to work independently. The next step will be to develop this type of assessment for all volunteers; if the teens aren't getting it right, it's likely other folks won't, either.

Another useful tool is a checklist of training items for volunteers and their trainers to mark; it represents an agreement that the content was taught by the trainer and received by the trainee. In the event a volunteer claims to have not learned something, you will then have documentation that they acknowledged receipt of the information, which can come in handy in the event of a disciplinary action.

Finally, we highly recommend that the training be part of the application process to be a volunteer. You need to actually see a volunteer in action and doing the work to see if they are going to be successful in the position. It's important to make this clear at the outset and inform potential volunteers that the training process is a way to see if the volunteer position is a good fit for them. Too often shelters bring in people to volunteer who aren't right and can't or won't follow the training, but feel that they can't ask them to leave after they've started.

All of these steps require some effort on the part of volunteer managers and the organizations they serve. It might feel like an overwhelming task, but the benefits are such that agencies can't afford not to do the structural work required to make the program succeed. Stepping back from the hectic day-to-day to accomplish this type of analysis and program development will produce incredible dividends and benefit the program immeasurably. You just need to be willing to take the first step. **AS**

Go to animalsheltering.org/volunteer_skills for a chart that will help you determine necessary skills and training for your volunteer positions.